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A

L E T T E R

ADDRESSED TO THE

CLERGY AND LAITY

OF HIS

PROVINCE,

BY

WILLIAM, LORD ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY.

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LETTER,

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FOR a considerable time past my attention has been anxiously turned to the divisions in the Church, occasioned by differences of opinion with respect to the intention of certain rubrical directions in the Liturgy, and diversities of practice in the performance of Divine Service. These questions, relating to matters in themselves indifferent, but deriving importance from their connexion with the maintenance of uniformity and order in the solemn ministrations of the Church, are rendered difficult by the ambiguity of the Rubrics in some instances, and, in all, by the doubts which may arise as to the weight which should be allowed to general usage when it varies from the written law. It is partly on these accounts, and partly from uncertainty with respect to the extent of the powers committed to the Archbishop of the Province, in the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer, for the resolution of

doubts in regard to the contested points, that I have not felt myself justified in expressing an authoritative opinion upon questions occasionally submitted to me on these subjects. I was, indeed, willing to hope that these controversies, like many of much greater importance which have for a season disquieted the Church, would be suffered to die away of themselves, when the arguments on each side had been thoroughly sifted, from the good sense of the parties engaged in them, and the general conviction of their unprofitableness. But having been disappointed in this expectation, and considering the tendency of continued agitation to weaken the sacred bond of affection which ought to unite the Clergy and Laity as members of one body in Christ, I hold it a duty to come forward, in the hope of allaying animosities, and putting a stop to dissensions which are shown by experience to be not only unedifying but mischievous. With this view I would call your attention to a few considerations, which, with persons who are desirous of peace, will, I trust, have their due weight.

It has long been observed that, in the performance of Divine Service in the generality of our

parochial churches, there has been a deviation, in certain particulars, from the express directions of the Rubric, and that, in some cases, a difference in respect to the sense of the Rubric has led to a diversity in practice. In regard to such points, in themselves non-essential, the most conscientious clergymen have felt themselves justified in treading in the steps of their predecessors ; and hence the irregularity (for all departure from rule is irregular), which seems, in some instances at least, to have existed from the beginning, became inveterate. There have, I apprehend, at all times been clergymen who have been distressed by this inconsistency ; and of late years it has been regarded by many excellent men as irreconcilable with the obligations which they took upon themselves on their admission into Holy Orders. Under the influence of these scruples, they thought it right to adhere as closely as possible to the letter of the Rubric in their ministrations ; whilst others of their brethren, not less conscientious, have been determined by considerations, in their estimation of great weight, to follow the usage which they found established in their respective churches. Under these circumstances a diversity of practice has

arisen, which is not only inconsistent with the principle of uniformity maintained by the Church, but is sometimes associated in the minds of the people with peculiarities of doctrine, and gives birth to suspicions and jealousies destructive of the confidence which should always subsist between the flock and their pastor. To prevent the increase of an evil which might terminate in actual schisms was confessedly most desirable; and the most effectual mode of accomplishing the object, it has been thought, would be found in general conformity to the Rubric. Universal concurrence in this easy and obvious regulation would have combined the several advantages of securing compliance with the law of the Church and the land, of putting a stop to unauthorized innovations, and of excluding party distinctions, in their character decidedly unchristian, from the public worship of God; and I cannot but regret that measures which, with a view to these good purposes, have been recommended by high authorities, should not have been received with unanimous acquiescence, as the means of restoring order and peace, without any departure from the principles of the Church, or offence to the most scrupulous conscience.

At the same time, I am sensible that those who object have much to allege in their justification. If the written law is against them, they plead an opposite usage, in parochial churches at least, reaching back, perhaps, to the time when the intention of the lawgiver was best understood, superseding its literal sense, and determining its real meaning; they appeal to the general consent of Bishops, Clergy and Laity, implied in the absence of any effectual interference during so long a period; they object to the sudden revival of rules, which in their opinion are obsolete, and still more, to their rigid enforcement after so long a term of abeyance. In fairness to them we must allow, that this dislike of alterations in the manner of worship to which they have been accustomed from their infancy, proceeding, as it does, from attachment to the ordinances of the Church, ought not to be visited with unkindly censure; and we can hardly be surprised at any change being regarded with suspicion when so many attempts have been made to introduce innovations which are really objectionable, and tend, as far as they go, to alter the character of our Church. It must also be granted that the intention of the Church is not always clearly dis-

coverable from the language of the Rubric, nor determinable with absolute certainty from the records of early practice. In such cases it may with some show of reason be said, that, as the eminent men to whom the several revisions of the Liturgy were successively entrusted, did not see the necessity of giving directions so precise as to ensure a rigid conformity in every particular, we may be contented to acquiesce in slight deviations from rule, suggested by convenience, and sanctioned by long usage.

Now, whatever may be the force of the arguments on either side, a difference of opinion will probably always exist in regard to the contested points. But all parties will concur in regarding these points as of far less importance than the maintenance of that mutual confidence which, next to support from above, forms the main strength of the Church, producing the harmonious co-operation of its several members, and disposing the people to look up with reverence to their pastor as their spiritual instructor and guide. In whatever degree, or by whatever means, the tie of affection is loosened, a proportionate diminution will follow of that moral influ-

ence on which the efficiency of the Clergyman's teaching will always depend.

The case, then, if fairly considered with reference to the existing dissensions, and the results to be expected from their continuance, will show the necessity of mutual forbearance to the peace and the honour, I may even say, to the safety, of the Church. The Laity, it may be hoped, will see the propriety of respecting the consciences of such of the Clergy as have held themselves bound to strict compliance with the express directions of the Rubric, without regard to former disuse; and the Clergy will perceive the expediency of not pressing too harshly, or abruptly, the observance of laws which, having by themselves and their predecessors been long suffered to sleep, have now the appearance of novelty. I am fully alive to the importance of uniformity in the celebration of Divine Service; but I think it would be purchased too dearly at the expense of lasting divisions,—a consequence which, I trust, will be averted by a suspension of the existing disputes. My hope of such an adjustment is grounded on the wisdom, temper, and piety which are engaged

on both sides of the question. A settlement which would have the sanction of law is at the present moment impossible ; and, were it possible, could hardly be attempted with hope of success, till the subsisting excitement has been allayed by time and reflection. But till that time shall arrive, our regard to the spiritual interests of our brethren ought surely to put a stop to contentions, which, besides the offence against charity, engage much time and ability which might be infinitely better applied, and which can afford pleasure to those only who bear ill-will to our Church. The matters in controversy, considered in themselves, are not of vital importance : the service in our Churches has in general been conducted in conformity to the Apostle's direction, with order and decency ; and, whether performed with exact regard to the letter of the Rubric, or with the variations established by general usage, will still be decent and orderly. I therefore entreat you to consider, whether the peace of the Church should be hazarded by prolonging an unprofitable controversy, at a time, more especially, when her energies are directed, with such hope of success, to the promotion of religion and morals, and when

the Clergy and Laity are zealously engaged in united exertions for the erection and endowment of Churches and Schools, and for other pious and beneficial objects, in almost every part of the country.

What I would most earnestly recommend, for the present, is the discontinuance of any proceedings, in either direction, on the controverted questions. In churches where alterations have been introduced with general acquiescence, let things remain as they are ; in those which retain the less accurate usage, let no risk of division be incurred by any attempt at change, till some final arrangement can be made with the sanction of the proper authorities. In the case of churches where agitation prevails, and nothing has been definitely settled, it is not possible to lay down any general rule which may be applicable to all circumstances. But is it too much to hope that those who are zealous for the honour of God and the good of his Church, will show, by the temporary surrender of their private opinions, that they are equally zealous in the cause of peace and charity ?

On the particular questions which disquiet the public mind, I think it unadvisable to pronounce an opinion. Upon careful examination, I have found reason to think, that some of these questions are more difficult of solution than is commonly imagined, and that the meaning which occurs at first sight is not always the most correct. And the general question, in respect to what should be conceded to usage in controlling or modifying the written law, seems to me to be open to much doubt. But, if I were ever so fully persuaded in my own mind, I should be unwilling, for reasons already assigned, to pronounce a judgment which, not having legal authority, might be accepted by some and disregarded by others, and might thus increase the confusion which it was designed to remedy. For similar reasons I have not thought it expedient to call the Bishops of my Province together at this time, though it will be my desire, as well as my duty, to seek their advice and assistance when a fit opportunity presents itself. I am, however, fully assured of their general concurrence in deprecating the continuance of discussions, which will undoubtedly multiply strife and contention,

but which, in the present posture of things, can lead to no beneficial result.

In order to guard against misapprehension, I think it proper to state, that all I have here said is strictly confined to the rubrical questions which have occasioned the present agitation. All change in the performance of the Service, affecting the doctrine of the Church, by alteration, addition, or omission, I regard with unqualified disapprobation. I may further remark, that the danger to the Church would be great, if clergymen, not having due respect either to episcopal authority or established usage, should interpret the Rubric for themselves, should introduce or curtail ceremonies at pleasure, or make Divine Service in any way the means of expressing their own theological opinions or party views. In respect to the Ritual, the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer directs all persons having doubts, or diversly taking any thing in the performance of the Church Service, to resort to the Bishop of the diocese for the resolution of such doubts, and the appeasing of diversities. Had due attention been paid, from the first, to this salutary

rule, the Church might perhaps have been saved from much of the dissension which at various times has divided her members, and grieved and perplexed her rulers, and which, if not speedily checked, may again cause a serious disturbance of her peace. Considering the course I have suggested as offering the only immediate means of averting such a calamity, and at the same time preparing the way for a final arrangement at a convenient season, I earnestly recommend its adoption, in the hope that, through the blessing of God, it may lay the foundation of lasting peace ; “ and to this end ”—(I borrow the words of a learned and pious ritualist)—“ to this end may the God of Peace give us all meek hearts, quiet spirits, and devout affections, and free us from all prejudice, that we may have full churches, frequent prayers, and fervent charity ; that, uniting in our prayers here, we may all join in His praises hereafter, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.”
Amen.

W. CANTUAR.

Lambeth Palace,
Jan. 11, 1845.





